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Introduction

How long does it take for a book to become a classic? In the case of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, seven years clearly were more than enough. Since its publication in 2007, the Canadian philosopher's book has inspired wide discussion and generated an astonishing number of responses. What is more, the debate has been taking place in a wide range of disciplines: philosophy and sociology, theology and history, political science and literature, anthropology and religious studies, and other fields. In the English language alone there have been far more than 100 direct responses to or reviews of the book since its publication in 2007 (see the annotated bibliography at the end of this volume).

The contributions to the present volume are equally varied. This is a good thing: no contribution in itself can do justice to Taylor's rich work. Rather, the individual responses to *A Secular Age* might better be understood as illuminating its manifold aspects from various angles, and only in their collectivity might they approach something like a 'complete picture.' Part of this picture is that some contributors engage more critically with *A Secular Age* than others, and that Taylor's book can be more fruitfully worked with in some disciplines than in others. With contributions from nine disciplines, this volume illustrates the enormous potential of Taylor's work for interdisciplinary research. It also points to certain limits in this regard.

Stories

The volume is structured around the concept of 'story.' Taylor himself writes that "[i]t is a crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical; [....] In other words, our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there" (ASA[1]: 29). He offers this in part as a defense of the length of his own book, which audaciously toggles between nuanced intellectual and cultural history, broad empirical observations, philosophical analysis, and normative claims. This generic blend has sometimes been misunderstood by readers, who may wish for something else: more empirical data, perhaps, or less historical texture. But the mixture is crucial to Taylor's own story, which aims among

1 Throughout this volume, reference to *A Secular Age* is made by "ASA," departing from the general style of references, which would demand "Taylor 2007."

other things to get us to feel or sense what it is like to live in a secular age. In this regard, Taylor's "story" demands a kind of interpretive work from its readers, particularly because good stories, or those we deem classics, are always susceptible to multiple interpretations.

In a fundamental sense, *A Secular Age* retells the story of (Western) secularization in order to understand who we are and how we came to be that way. Whilst Taylor does not negate common descriptions of secularity as consisting of social differentiation or the decreasing relevance of religion in the public sphere (which he terms "secularity 1") or as a decline in religious belief and practice ("secularity 2"), his focus is on what he introduces as "secularity 3," namely the background assumptions against which an age or era shows up as "secular." "Why," he asks, "was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" (ASA: 25).

One answer to that question is what Taylor calls "subtraction stories" (ASA: 22). Subtraction stories offer causal accounts of the spread of secularity: the rise of science and growing urbanization and industrialization brings about an inevitable decline of religion. Taylor opposes this linear description of the gradual decline of religion in human history by describing the vicissitudes and contingencies of religious change as a "zig zag" (ASA: 95). More importantly, he investigates the normative underpinnings of secularity itself, which he understands as something that was built (sometimes deliberately, sometimes haphazardly) rather than simply exposed by the subtraction of religion. This alternative story is what Taylor calls a "Reform Master Narrative." For Taylor, (Western) secularity originates in Christianity, more specifically in a drive for reform that is both theological and behavioral, and which gathered momentum in the early modern period. A summary of this narrative can be found in the first chapter by Matthias Koenig and, with a slightly different focus, in the subsequent contribution by Günter Thomas. It is important to stress that Taylor's "Reform" is not the same as the Protestant Reformation: it is a more encompassing movement, or set of impulses, that picked up speed in the fifteenth century and aimed to bring the details of ordinary human life, in all its contingency and ambivalence, into line with the demands of religious and cultural elites. In a more literary idiom, "Reform" means the imposition of form upon content, with all the gains and losses that attend such an imposition.

The chapters in this volume not only focus on different aspects of Taylor's story but also assess the relevance of the narrative character of *A Secular Age* differently. Taylor's book is most radically treated as a story, as opposed to history, in the contributions by Joyce Dalsheim and Reinhard Schulze, whilst others give it greater historical credibility, for example Jonathan Lanman and Oane Reitsma.

A middle position, if you wish, is taken up by Courtney Bender, who considers Taylor's story as "true insofar as its narrative becomes part of the story that we tell about ourselves." In that line, Florian Zemmin regards Taylor's story as a useful heuristic tool for uncovering other stories of modernity, in this case Islamic ones, while Samuel Shearn takes one kind of story – the genealogy – as a point of contact between Taylor and Nietzsche, and Thomas Carlson assesses the narrative pressure that Augustine's account of time exerts on Taylor's analysis. Whether the book's analysis is treated primarily as story or as history, meanwhile, a critique of *A Secular Age* recurring in all three sociological contributions of this volume (the ones by Koenig, Bender, and Burchardt) is that Taylor neglects the role of institutional power and conflicts around evolving secular convictions.

Social imaginaries

Taylor is concerned throughout the book with the interplay between explicit theories and implicit background understandings. Elite secular ideas make their way to broader populations by way of what he calls "social imaginaries." The origins of this concept, which Taylor elaborates in his book *Modern Social Imaginaries* from 2004, can be traced to an article published two years earlier as part of a special journal issue on *New Imaginaries* (Taylor 2002). The members of the working group behind this special issue employed the idea of social imaginary in quite different ways; in Taylor's case, however, Cornelius Castoriadis's coinage of the concept is still very visible. Castoriadis (1987) had introduced "[t]he idea of a social imaginary as an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents" (Gaonkar 2002). Social imaginaries are both fundamental and hard to pin down or delineate; indeed, Castoriadis (1987: 128) likened imaginaries to "what Hegel called 'the spirit of a people'."

Taylor himself defines social imaginaries as incorporating "a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice" (ASA: 172). Taylor, himself a distinguished Hegel scholar, actually locates the concept of social imaginaries in the Kantian tradition, identifying their role with that of Kantian transcendental schemes. When a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary, "this process isn't just one-sided; a theory making over a social imaginary. The theory in coming to make sense of the action is 'glossed,' as it were, given a particular shape as the context

of these practices. Rather like Kant's notion of an abstract category becoming 'schematized' when it is applied to reality in space and time, the theory is schematized in the dense sphere of common practice" (ASA: 176). However, there remains a central difference between Kant's transcendental schemes and Taylor's social imaginaries. Whereas Kant's transcendental schemes are universal and mainly tailored to the use of scientific concepts, Taylor's social imaginaries are historical and related to the domain of human experiences.

The idea of social imaginaries, as distinguished from explicitly held doctrines or elaborated theories, alerts us to the importance of common implicit understandings lying behind disputes among religious and secular positions. In this regard, the central aim of Taylor's story in *A Secular Age* is to do justice to the specificity of our secular age by articulating these shared implicit understandings, whether we consider ourselves religious or not. Following Heidegger, Taylor defines these implicit understandings as our "pre-ontology" or "background" (ASA: 3, 13, passim). Since social imaginaries are deeply embedded in our pre-ontology, we are in need of stories which make explicit the implicit views lurking in the tacit background and situated in the long historical process of modernity.

The concept of the social imaginary therefore does two distinct kinds of work in *A Secular Age*. First, it aims to illuminate, from the inside as it were, *what it means to live in a secular age*. The shared social imaginary of modern life is what Taylor calls the "immanent frame." While the immanent frame is not necessarily closed to transcendence, its tacit world-picture includes a world defined by natural science and governed by impersonal laws and a social order that is historical in the sense that it has been created by actions that happened in historical time. Thus, when Taylor says that it is a "crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical," he is in fact giving voice to a basic part of the immanent frame itself. He aims to give an account of our modern social imaginary *from within that same imaginary*, and that makes his own account, again, an interpretive one. Several of the contributions to this volume, notably those by Carlson, Jager, Shearn, and Reitsma, follow Taylor down this interpretive path, testing his depiction of the immanent frame against alternative possibilities (those found in Heidegger, Schiller, Nietzsche, and classical music, respectively).

Secondly, the concept of the social imaginary also aims to account for the diffusion of elite theories to whole societies – to explain, that is to say, *how we became secular*. Yet from the perspective of social science, the explanatory potential of this concept is debatable. It remains unclear exactly how the interplay of theory and imaginary works (see Bender this volume: 286fn4; Koenig this volume: 41). More fundamentally, the very concept of social imaginaries remains somewhat vague and is problematically identified with abstract cultural entities

(Strauss 2006; Zemmin this volume: 314 – 315). In this light it is even more interesting that from the perspective of cognitive science, Jonathan Lanman in his contribution to this volume argues that the concept of social imaginary could be fruitfully operated with. At the other end of the spectrum, Reinhard Schulze maintains that "social imaginary" should not be treated as a concept at all, since it is a metaphor which works only within Taylor's particular story. Florian Zemmin argues that the concept can nevertheless be fruitfully applied to other contexts and stories, namely as a "heuristic tool."

Central to the modern social imaginary as depicted by Taylor is the idea of the separation between natural-supernatural or immanent-transcendent. While Oane Reitsma demonstrates how post-romantic classical music absorbs and (he argues) occasionally transcends that same distinction, Junaid Quadri and Johannes Stephan, in their contributions, trace these distinctions in an Islamic context. Meanwhile, the chapters in the second section are concerned with the normative premises and implications of this imaginary and with its limits and contestations.

Taylor's story among the disciplines

From the moment of its publication, *A Secular Age* has inspired disparate responses, and the essays gathered here testify to this diversity. Taken together, the contributors represent nine distinct disciplines, and this variety of approach yields a correspondingly various set of judgements about Taylor's text. It might be helpful, then, to imagine a sliding scale of interdisciplinary engagement. At one extreme, one might extend Taylor's argument more-or-less unmodified into debates in one's own discipline; at the other, one might criticize *A Secular Age* from the perspective of a particular discipline. Though the contributions gathered here necessarily differ in emphasis, all of them move dialectically between these poles. None simply import *A Secular Age* wholesale, nor simply disparage it from a supposedly superior disciplinary standpoint.

With varying degrees of explicitness, one question occurs in each of the essays collected here: is Taylor's account descriptive, interpretive, normative, or explanatory? Put differently, does it aim to *describe* our current condition (the characteristics of being Western and modern at this particular historical juncture)? Does it aim to *interpret* that condition (to dwell on the possibilities and capacities that the secular age opens up and closes down)? Does it *explain* how we got here (giving reasons for the evolution of the immanent frame, or proposing causal accounts of how we moved from a condition of naive to reflexive belief)? Or does it aim at a *normative* account (criticizing the modern condition, offering rea-

sons for thinking of the immanent frame as open or closed, or proposing how we might live under conditions of religious pluralism)? The short answer, of course, is that *A Secular Age* aims to do all of the above – such is the ambition of this ambitious book. But, as always, it is the question of emphasis – both Taylor's emphasis and the emphases of his readers – that will determine how we read Taylor's story.

We have organized the collection into four sections. While most chapters in this volume interweave general reflections on the usability of *A Secular Age* with a specific research project, the contributions assembled in the first section are dedicated more exclusively to evaluating the general potential of Taylor's story for their respective disciplines. The second section treats the normative dimensions of Taylor's alternative story in *A Secular Age*, following Taylor's own lead, if not always his conclusions, by using the various problematics of pluralism to challenge the hegemony of mainstream secularization stories. In a more interpretive vein, the third section uses the concept of "subtler language" to consider alternative accounts of the secular age opened up by Taylor's own descriptive story. And the fourth section explores modern Islamic self-understandings and stories of secularity. The next portions of this introduction contain summaries and analyses of these four sections and their individual chapters.

Beginning the first section, Matthias Koenig explores the potential of *A Secular Age* for sociological theories of secularity and secularization. Summarizing recent assessments of these theories, Koenig formulates three requirements to be fulfilled by any alternative account of secularity: it must explain how secularity became such an important and controversial category (1), it must integrate empirical evidence pointing both to the decline of religion and to religious vitality that varies by region, history, and population (2), and it must explain the diversity of modern religious and political differentiation patterns in cross-national and cross-cultural perspective (3). Closely examining the major premises, concepts, and landmarks of *A Secular Age*, Koenig maintains that Taylor's "culturalist theory of modernity" clearly fulfills the first two requirements, yet fails to deliver on the third. For Koenig, Taylor's story fruitfully brings up historical and sociological questions which cannot be answered by large-scale narratives like Taylor's own.

The Protestant theologian Günter Thomas argues that Taylor's story is fuelled not only by Christian but more specifically by Catholic convictions. Taylor's apologetic approach to history, he writes, results in an unfair treatment of the historical role of Protestantism itself, which for Thomas is a story of "education and freedom, which cannot simply be shelved under Reform." And whilst Taylor allegedly portrays a nostalgic Catholic mysticism as the only remedy for the irreversible result of the process of Reform, "Protestants rely on the many forms of

the presence of the resurrected Christ through the Holy Spirit in real, communal and thoroughly plural practices of faith, hope, and love." Despite his rather critical reading of both Taylor's historical narrative and its contemporary diagnosis, however, Thomas points to significant challenges formulated in *A Secular Age* that require an answer by Protestant theologians: a more nuanced relationship to modernity and a Trinitarian theological account of the secular that locates fullness neither exclusively in immanence nor in transcendence but dynamically connects both.

Some readers, including several contributors to this volume, have criticized *A Secular Age* for dwelling too much on broad-based cultural change and not enough on specific institutional configurations and conflicts of interest. By contrast, Jonathan Lanman's contribution, which considers the relevance of Taylor's story for the burgeoning field of cognitive science of religion (CSR), suggests that pieces of a causal explanation do indeed exist in Taylor's account. On first glance, CSR seems methodologically alien to Taylor's story. But Lanman thinks that CSR should aim to complement philosophical and cultural interpretations of religious experiences and actions with explanations of their underlying cognitive dispositions. He suggests that CSR can complement Taylor's account by offering explanations for different levels of belief *within* the North Atlantic world, from the growth of new religious movements to the rise of non-theism. The evidence from cognitive science is that levels of religious belief depend less upon what people say than upon what they do. Thus, the disembodiment of religion brought about by social differentiation (secularity 1) combined with changed conditions of belief (secularity 3) might in turn yield lower levels of belief and participation (secularity 2). Though Lanman remarks that taking social imaginaries as objects of analysis in the study of religious cognition remains a challenge, his proposal has the effect of supporting Taylor's contention that changes in the conditions of belief can causally influence levels of religious participation. In this way, his contribution offers an implicit response to the sociological charge, voiced here by Koenig and Bender, that Taylor is not able to provide a causal account of religious change.

Normative stories in a secular age

The normative discussion about the exact definition of 'religion' and 'secularity' is an old one. But in *A Secular Age* Taylor gives that discussion a new and unexpected twist. *A Secular Age* is explicitly framed as an alternative story to mainstream master narratives of secularization, in part because Taylor believes that the hegemony of such narratives has in fact helped to bring about the present

secular age. Taylor's alternative 'Reform Master Narrative,' therefore, is itself a normative account as well as a descriptive one. If Taylor's alternative story about the genesis and evolution of the secular age is accepted as a more convincing genealogical account of modernity, then it implies as well an alternative normative approach to the contemporary relation between secularity and religion.

At the end of *A Secular Age*, Taylor states that in the account he is offering "there is no place for unproblematic breaks with a past which is simply left behind" (ASA: 772). Like Robert Bellah, he believes that with regard to people's past imaginaries and convictions "nothing is ever lost." This emphasis on a narrative of slow change works against a reading of Taylor's initial question ("why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?") as itself positing a sharp break or abrupt transition. Taylor thinks that simply breaking with a problematic past may give rise to the repetition of its horrors in the modern secular era. He opts instead for a story, through which a fusion of past and present horizons may take place. Especially in the domain of human affairs, where "understanding the other" (Taylor 2011) is at stake, this model of a "fusion of horizons" across both geographic and historical distance is related to the art of telling stories, rather than to the construction of scientific theories.

Taylor proposes that this plea for a "fusion of horizons" – the expression is borrowed from Gadamer – and for normative stories other than those coming from the epistemological tradition is applicable to the contemporary relation between religious and secular stances. Both Gadamer and Taylor challenge any assumption that identities in a secular age are self-enclosed. "Our past is sedimented in our present," as Taylor puts it (ASA: 29), and this demands an equilibrium between acknowledging completely different ways of being human on the one hand and living our own way on the other. It goes without saying that this equilibrium is difficult to achieve (Taylor 2011: 31–38).

From divergent perspectives, the five chapters in the second section all focus upon working with *A Secular Age* in order to approach that balance of understanding. Guido Vanheeswijck in his chapter asks whether the terms 'post-secular' and 'post-metaphysical stories' coined by Jürgen Habermas are humble words or words already surreptitiously transformed into arrogant ones, that is, whether they are successful or not in coping with the predicament of 'understanding the other.' Inspired by Taylor's position in *A Secular Age* and in subsequent essays, Vanheeswijck traces the consequences of divergent interpretations of these two words regarding the role of religious and metaphysical arguments or "deep commitments" in the current debate on the place of religion in the public sphere. He suggests that the controversy around the interpretation of both words

is not only due to different epistemological premises, but to divergent political stances as well. Taylor himself has argued that achieving mutual respect and tolerance in this regard is the primary task of democratic societies. Following Taylor, Vanheeswijck proposes that this goal is less amenable to the neutrality of procedural rationality than to the imaginative force of what he calls "subtle words." Therefore, only normative stories that are aware of the subtlety of words can articulate the implicit background understandings that all participants carry with them into discussion.

Coming at the question of neutrality and its limits from a different angle, Aurélia Bardon shows why the liberal pluralism characteristic of our secular age is itself not a neutral story. Taylor's commitment to moral and epistemological pluralisms reveals the fact that the immanent frame, which here stands for modern liberal society, is in fact based on specific normative and epistemological assumptions. Only such assumptions can explain why we expect and accept both moral and epistemological pluralism. Bardon makes it clear that these normative and epistemological assumptions are themselves limited and cannot include certain metaphysical claims. In other words, the liberal commitment to moral and epistemological pluralisms is not and cannot be based on the validity of metaphysical pluralism. This is why in Taylor's view "the language of some public bodies, for instance courts, has to be free from premises drawn from one or another position." If liberal pluralism is taken seriously as a normative story, according to Bardon, the official position has to be no position at all.

The first two contributions in this section mainly elaborate on Taylor's position; the next two are more critical of his general stance when applied to specific situations.

Marian Burchardt explores how *A Secular Age* is related to the normative claims in the fierce debates about secularism in Quebec, and to Taylor's own political interventions in them. He begins by examining Taylor's argument that strong versions of secularization, based on the idea of emancipation from religion, reify secularism as a goal in its own right instead of being subservient to promoting the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity. Next, he evaluates Taylor's claim that the traditional view of religion as playing an ambiguous, if not detrimental, role in the promotion of these values must be reassessed and perhaps even reversed. In the second part of his essay, Burchardt explores how in modern-day Quebec, "this rehabilitation underwrites the project to respect and promote religious diversity." However, it also clashes with notions of secularity as a "lever of national unity and progress."

In her chapter on "other sovereignties in Israel/Palestine," Joyce Dalsheim, too, claims that Taylor's story in *A Secular Age* is not innocent. In particular, she is concerned with those who live in the shadows of the hegemonic secular moral

order Taylor describes in *A Secular Age* and who can be produced as enemies of the order itself. Ironically enough, the production of such enemies is especially important in contemporary attempts at peacemaking. This is because attempts at peacemaking take place within the modern social imaginary, an important part of which is the idea of "the sovereign people." As Dalsheim shows, some people in Israel/Palestine have begun thinking and acting in ways that pose challenges to the "sovereignty" component that underlies the modern nation-state. Dalsheim focuses on three examples – each of which poses a different challenge to what is generally thought of popular sovereignty and may therefore be considered "spoilers" of peace. She tells these alternative stories to mark the borders of the moral order of a secular age in which conventional peacemaking is carried out.

In the final contribution to this section, Reinhard Schulze poses the fundamental question of why storytelling has reemerged in the last decade as a "meaning-producing force." Taylor's assertion in *A Secular Age* that "we (modern Westerners) can't understand ourselves except via [...] narratives" (Taylor 2010: 300) becomes for Schulze a method for convincing rather than verifying, whose metaphors and arguments only work within the story itself. The "open secularism" for which Taylor has argued elsewhere is also the endpoint of *A Secular Age*, Schulze proposes, and its goal is that of an affirmative genealogy: reassuring the West of its particularity and excellence in an era of globalization. Noting the Christian roots of the concept 'secular' itself, Schulze proposes not a non-Christian genealogy of secularity but a more Foucauldian genealogy of the modern orders of religion and society, which in almost all great traditions "grew out of a unified normative order which had related the world in its totality to a transcendental truth."

Taylor's story and the subtler languages

The questions of meaning and meaningfulness raised in Schulze's contribution are the explicit topics of this volume's third group of essays. Midway through *A Secular Age*, Taylor writes that "the development of modern poetics, and in general the languages of art, has enabled people to explore [...] meanings with their ontological commitments as it were in suspense" (ASA: 351). Here Taylor proposes that Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics developed or invented a language that captured the unique phenomenology of the secular age. There were unbelievers before Romanticism, of course, but Taylor claims that, beyond a few elite enclaves, neither their experience nor the experiences of their believing neighbors could have been rendered in the open, tentative fashion that has be-

come familiar to us in the post-Romantic age. Rhetorically, meanwhile, Taylor's claim about modern poetics serves as something of an allegory for his book's own method. The key phrases of the first half of the book – the "buffered self," the "work of reform," the "great disembedding," "discipline," and "social imaginaries" – are terms drawn from or developed out of social and philosophical theories. Taylor's invocation of terms like "commitment" and "suspension" in the second half, then, marks a shift toward the languages of authenticity that will preoccupy him in the remainder of *A Secular Age*, and that have concerned him as well in earlier publications (Taylor 1989; 1992). Thus the appeal to suspension is itself suspended between the two halves of *A Secular Age*, a pause or hesitation before the book pitches fully into its discussion of modernity proper.

Taylor marks this moment with a term borrowed from the English Romantic poet Percy Shelley: the "subtler language." That term signals a new social imaginary: where once artists could assume a common lexicon and a common manner of interpreting both natural and social worlds as structured by a divine hierarchy and benevolent order, that assumption no longer held true by the early years of the nineteenth century. The subtler languages of artistic practice thus come to imagine creativity in a new way, as a space of immanent possibility or what Shelley himself called the "vitally metaphorical" quality of authentic language that "marks the before unapprehended relations of things" ([1821] 2002: 512). Romantic artists, Taylor writes, are "trying to say something for which no adequate terms exist and whose meaning has to be sought in [the] works rather than in a pre-existing lexicon of references" (ASA: 354).

It is important to be clear that this is not a blueprint for unrestrained subjectivity or self-projection – that is a misinterpretation that haunts, Taylor thinks, some aspects of the secular age, which equates authenticity with self-determining freedom. By contrast, the subtler languages do indeed hook onto some aspect of the world; in a philosophic idiom, they have an 'intentional object.' But it remains the case that apprehension of that object may not be widely shared and therefore must be disclosed by the constitutive activity of poetic language itself. Taylor seems to be suggesting that, properly read, the subtler languages hold the key to understanding our secular age itself, to its distinctive feel and mood, its capacities and limitations, its cross-pressures and unquiet frontiers. In this way, the subtler languages are the languages of the immanent frame – the languages of secularity, even if their content may be overtly religious. This helps to explain why Taylor turns increasingly to literary and artistic examples in the second half of the book.

The notion of subtler languages invites a broadly interpretive relationship to Taylor's own text. *A Secular Age* is, after all, a story, and stories demand inter-

pretation. Accordingly, the chapters gathered in the third section consider the interpretive possibilities opened up by Taylor's account.

Colin Jager's contribution, which closely analyzes Taylor's own investment in romanticism, particularly in Shelley and Schiller, suggests a reading of Taylor's story that carries forward the political claims of the book's first section – that secularization-as-Reform was an overt project of elites to separate themselves from popular culture – into the subtler and more aesthetic matters treated in the latter half of *A Secular Age*. In implicit disagreement with Schulze and others for whom Taylor's account is too uncritically celebratory of a certain model of Western modernity, Jager sees Taylor's turn to the aesthetic not as de-politicizing but rather as a means of carrying forward the book's loosely New Left politics within what Jager calls a "fugitive space."

The musicologist Oane Reitsma's contribution adopts Taylor's framework in order to help explain a basic fact about modern art, and music in particular. Whereas music was once embedded in a larger cultural and social matrix – architecture, liturgy, social hierarchy – that contributed to its meaning and significance, music from the late eighteenth century onward had largely to create those contexts for itself. In the abstract, silent, and artificial space of the concert hall, Reitsma argues, music achieves its own "absolute autonomy." He analyzes the identity of post-romantic musical works themselves as markers of the buffered identities of modernity, the secular space of the romantic-era concert hall, with its standardized seating and relative equality of rank, and, finally, the experience of time within modern musical culture. Though largely accepting Taylor's analysis of the secular age, Reitsma shows how close attention to individual works of art reveals that they can "also fulfill a kairotic function in a secular age." Ultimately, this seems a more hopeful description of the secular landscape than that offered by Taylor himself.

Schiller begins his analysis of what he calls "aesthetic education" with the seemingly intractable conflict between will and desire. Friedrich Nietzsche, another of Taylor's philosophical interlocutors, also begins with this conflict. But unlike Schiller, Nietzsche does not think this opposition can be resolved by the free play of aesthetics. Rather, he wants to subvert it altogether. Samuel Shearn nevertheless shows in his contribution that Taylor's account of the secular age remains deeply invested in a Nietzschean critique of humanism and in Nietzsche's genealogical method. Many commentators have noted that Taylor's own theological commitments circulate throughout *A Secular Age*; Shearn's essay, by contrast, offers a deeper reading of Taylor's a-theological sources. Certainly, Taylor in the end proposes that Christianity is superior to Nietzschean anti-humanism because it provides more resources for effecting a transformation that doesn't mutilate our humanity. But, writing from the perspective of Christian

theology, Shearn shows how Taylor's theological thinking is enriched by his contact with Nietzsche.

The final two essays in this section are somewhat more skeptical about the adequacy of subtler languages for capturing the nuances of the secular age. Like Shearn, Thomas Carlson turns to a thinker of the counter-enlightenment – Heidegger, in this case – in order to explore the landscape of contemporary spiritual options. But unlike Shearn, Carlson uses this counter-enlightenment tradition to develop an account of love as a "secular mood." Against Taylor's claim that the death of a loved one creates a distinctively modern crisis of meaning, Carlson shows how Heidegger's reading of Augustine enables him to develop an account of love that accepts mortality and does not long for eternity. Taylor, of course, finds Heidegger's well-known critique of instrumental rationality and empty technocratic time very congenial – just as he finds Nietzsche's critique of humanism useful. But Carlson insists that Taylor misses a crucial element of the counter-enlightenment tradition stretching from Nietzsche to Derrida, namely that it is not simply critical of the scientific quest for certainty but also resists the kind of temporal consummation central to Augustinian-Hegelian thinking. To love someone, Carlson argues, is to affirm their mortality and vulnerability. Thus, he concludes, Taylor's reading of the relation between time and meaning, as exemplified for instance in his notion of "fullness," causes him not only to misread Heidegger but to misread the mood of the secular age itself, which is better prepared to deal with death than Taylor is able to acknowledge.

Courtney Bender, likewise, interprets the notion of a subtler language as largely compensatory and dependent upon a notion of lost wholeness. Her ethnographic account of the contemporary North American spiritual landscape, like Carlson's more philosophical version, takes issue with Taylor's language of "fullness," whose nostalgia, she concludes, leads Taylor to miss the possibilities that are actually available within the modern spiritual scene. She notes that in nineteenth-century America, for example, romanticism described less a place of ontic suspension than of interconnection, particularly as the spirits and experiences of the Western frontier began penetrating urban drawing rooms and parlors. In a similar manner, Bender's ethnographic account of contemporary spiritual practitioners in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts, indicates that these subjects too remain porous, open to visitations from worlds beyond the skin and deeply connected to historical traditions. The sensibility of today's subtler languages, then, may be more relational and less buffered than Taylor allows.

Islamic stories

Taylor offers *A Secular Age* as one among several stories of Western secularity. He himself refers to two other accounts: the subtraction narratives that are his running target, and the kind of Intellectual Deviation story developed most prominently by the theologian John Milbank (ASA: 773–776). However, these options are hardly exhaustive. As shown in the contributions of Koenig and Burchardt in this volume, most recent sociological theory-making cannot really be called a "subtraction" story. And neither Taylor nor Milbank's so-called "Radical Orthodoxy," or even a combination of their accounts, will be the last word from the side of Christian thinkers or theologians. Indeed, in the first section of this volume, the Protestant theologian Günter Thomas points to an alternative Protestant account of secularity, criticizing the role Taylor assigns to Protestantism in his own story. There are, moreover, a range of distinctions and issues of 'difference' that are not addressed in Taylor's cultural account of modernity. The issue of gender is entirely absent, as are the problems pertaining to the role of sexuality, class distinctions, immigration, disability, etc. Whilst it is important to keep these other differences in mind, giving them their full due would have made for a totally different work than *A Secular Age*. Aware of the particularity of Taylor's approach and its concommitant omissions, this volume focuses on one 'other' of the secular West which Taylor *explicitly* addresses, namely Islam.

Islam is a crucial 'other' in and to Western self-understandings in general, at once constituent of and set apart from the West. However we conceive of it specifically, the secular is widely regarded as a central characteristic of (Western) modernity, and within this formation Islam marks a crucial boundary. There have thus evolved Western and Islamic visions and stories of modernity, which cling to and perpetuate imagined characteristics and boundaries, quite detached from the historical record of entanglements between Christendom and Islamdom. No other 'other' plays a more significant role in the formation of modern Western self-understanding. The historical evolution of this formation and the power mechanisms at work therein have been aptly discussed in recent scholarship (Hurd 2010; Salama 2011). Taylor's "West," like any other civilization, is not a given but a construction and an imagination. However, this imagined 'Western civilization' has become highly relevant as a marker of identity and of modernity. Even though modern self-understanding only evolved in the "imperial encounter" (van der Veer 2001), it was most closely associated with the European tradition and then with the West, in which it consequently has been developed "most pronouncedly, albeit not without ambiguities" (Wagner 2014: 294). Importantly,

many of those identifying themselves as 'non-Westerners' have regarded the West as the epitome of modernity, for better or for worse.

The stories that non-Western Islamic societies tell about secularity and modernity are addressed in the three chapters of this volume's final section, which combine case studies on Islamic contexts with general theoretical, historical, and methodological considerations of the usability of *A Secular Age* beyond the West. Writing from within Islamic Studies as a confessionally neutral discipline, the authors do not develop an Islamic story of modernity themselves. Yet their findings clearly indicate the possibility of such Islamic stories, whether because of convergent developments within Islamic and Western self-understandings or because of Western (colonial and postcolonial) influence on Islamic societies. In their details, these Islamic stories will of course markedly differ from Taylor's story.

Florian Zemmin in his chapter argues that Taylor's story despite its particularity can fruitfully be used for research on modern Islamic self-understandings. *A Secular Age* is for Zemmin a useful heuristic tool precisely because Taylor grasps the profound background understandings of modernity "common not only to believers and non-believers in the West but possibly also to non-Westerners." Islamic societies, too, exhibit all three of Taylor's levels of secularity. Moreover, it is not only modern Westerners who understand their present selves historically. Rather than a different epistemology, it was "the asymmetric power constellations of colonialism [...] that have made it harder for Muslim intellectuals to bring forward their own stories." Zemmin complements his general considerations with a case study on the concept of 'society' in the modernist Islamic journal *al-Manar*.

Complementing Zemmin's focus on 'society,' Junaid Quadri's chapter considers the effect of the transcendent/immanent distinction for modern Islamic 'religion.' While Taylor has been criticized for neglecting non-Western contributions to the evolving modern understanding of religion, Quadri turns the tables on that critique by asking what sort of "conceptual reconfiguring this momentous intellectual shift in the West proceeded to make possible, or indeed necessary, for colonized peoples and knowledge-traditions." How well does the transcendence-immanence distinction travel to the Muslim world? Analyzing legal treatises from the Hanafi school of law, Quadri shows that in pre-modern times religious affairs, for which the sighting of the Ramadan moon is an example, were imbricated as much with immanence as with transcendence. In modernity, then, religion and religious matters came to be exclusively relegated to transcendence, simultaneously making room for an increasingly autonomous worldly sphere.

Johannes Stephan, who is attending to a slightly earlier moment in Arab intellectual history, also discerns the increasing autonomy and importance of the immanent sphere in the writings by two pioneers of the *nahḍa* (Arab Renaissance) he analyzes, the Egyptian Muslim Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi and the Syrian Christian Fransis Marrash. These prominent writers allow Stephan to approach and grasp Arab modernity as reflected in story-telling, and *A Secular Age* becomes a hermeneutic tool to make sense of and contextualize new modes of narration that emerged in modern Arabic literature. In the stories of these Arab intellectuals, "human society can develop independently from transcendent interference." Yet revelation did not disappear but actually regained importance as a marker of the cultural and historical entity that Arab thinkers understood themselves to belong to. Arab or Islamic civilization could thus be conceived as an entity in its own right which was participating in the same universal process as the West, that is, in the common (hi-)story of progress.

Enchantment, unbundling, and narrative

In his Afterword to this volume, Charles Taylor reiterates some of the main themes of *A Secular Age* and responds to several of the matters raised by the volume's contributors. He rejects the charge of nostalgia, raised implicitly or explicitly by several contributors to this volume (Carlson, Bender, Thomas). And he offers several interconnected reasons for the modern sense that both belief and nonbelief are options. Some of these will be familiar to readers of *A Secular Age* itself: disenchantment (both the demise of magic and the transformation of a hierarchically-tiered cosmos) and the consequent development of the immanent frame as our shared background condition. Taylor however here distinguishes between two kinds of enchantment, the first a narrower one, adopted from Weber, having to do with a sense of magical forces operating in the world, and the second a more capacious sense of attunement or kinship with the world beyond the self. This distinction matters when we come to speak of the secular age as one of disenchantment, for the demise of the first kind of enchantment does not necessarily lead to the demise of the second – though for Taylor and others on what he calls the "romantic side of this question," the two seem tightly bound.

Taylor also introduces the concept of "unbundling," and this in two related senses: the unbundling of forms of belonging (family, parish, nation) and the unbundling of spiritual and other activities previously gathered under the church. This seems closely related to social differentiation and therefore part of what Taylor calls "secularity 1" in *A Secular Age*. (As a reminder, secularity 1 for Taylor

is the withdrawal of religion from public life, while secularity 2 is the falling-off of belief and practice, and secularity 3, his main concern in *A Secular Age*, involves the background conditions against which the religious and the secular show up as such.) The shift of emphasis that Taylor makes in his Afterword is nevertheless significant; joining unbundling to disenchantment enables Taylor to speak more precisely of the social order, and offers something of a response to those readers, in this volume and elsewhere, who have thought that Taylor concentrates too much on ideas at the expense of socio-political structures. Implicitly, Taylor's point seems to be that spiritual and material factors are mutually dependent, and that secularity 1 and secularity 3 are perhaps more closely bound together than the depiction in *A Secular Age* suggests.

Finally, Taylor reiterates his position on two matters that emerge as key throughout the present volume. The first is the role of narrative, of the stories that societies and cultures tell about themselves and understand themselves to be a part of; the second is Taylor's commitment to the multiple modernities thesis and to the kind of comparative work that it makes possible. Interestingly, the comparative mode that Taylor favors both here and in other publications tends to treat cultures or civilizations as relatively self-enclosed entities, whereas a number of contributors to this volume insist upon a more fractured series of exchanges within as well as among cultures, for instance on the question of the immanent-transcendent distinction and indeed the very development of the idea of 'religion' itself. Thus the question of 'cultures,' and their relative enclosure or openness, remains a key methodological issue in Taylor's work and indeed in the question of secularity itself. On the matter of stories, meanwhile, Taylor writes that narrativity is essential to his project. He reconfirms his sense of what we might call the performative value of stories: that they are true insofar as they become part of a given society's self-understanding. Moreover, he suggests, experience of any kind is itself always embedded in a narrative, replete not with bare data but with a "certain construal of what is to be explained." Perhaps, then, we can read *A Secular Age* in just this fashion: as a narrative, a presentation of experience produced by an immensely gifted and generous writer, a story as true and compelling as he, and we, choose to make it.

Working with *A Secular Age*

This volume is rounded off with an annotated bibliography of previous responses to *A Secular Age*, compiled by Florian Zemmin. Looking both back and ahead, this bibliography gives an overview of the debate sparked by Taylor's book so far and functions as a resource for future contributions. Restricting itself to journal

articles, essays, and books written in English, the bibliography still comprises 122 entries.

This flourishing industry of commentary may seem remarkable. After all, the book is very long, often repetitive, and occasionally frustrating in its digressions and swerves. At the same time, this very capaciousness makes it a rich fund of ideas and arguments. Very few writers have Taylor's interdisciplinary reach. Moreover, the book entered a field whose activity and vibrancy made it ripe for a defining statement. Even though a good deal of the response to *A Secular Age* was variously critical, the book has served to invigorate and galvanize broader debates about religion and secularity. These two concepts remain fundamental to the (self-)understandings of modernity, and the relation between religion and society has been hotly debated during recent decades, as the identification of modernization with the decline of religion loses its explanatory force. In this regard, Taylor does much more than argue for the religious genealogy of secularity or the continued salience of religion in modernity. Indeed, he directs our attention to the most fundamental background assumptions of modernity shared by all modern people, believers and non-believers alike. From this it follows that, contrary to one common assumption, controversies between religious and secular positions do *not* necessarily concern fundamental epistemological conflicts but rather play out on a common, if contested, ground. Taylor's "secular age" is not equivalent to an "age of secularism" but is rather a synonym for 'modernity,' in which both religious and secular stances have become an option.

The mutual dependency of religion and secularity also points to a dilemma. What are the other 'others' of religion, and how do we get analytic purchase on them? This is the question addressed in the title of this book series, *Religion and Its Others*. Taylor's implicit answer in *A Secular Age* is that secularity sets the conditions not only for religion but for modern life in all its varieties. By the same token, Taylor's work points the way toward analyses of such 'others' of religion as exclusive humanism, atheism, or religious indifference. In our contemporary societies, where the division between religion and secularity has become dominant, tracing the relation between that divide and others (queer/straight, human/animal, eg.) is work that still largely remains to be done. How might one go about telling such stories? Though the chapters in this volume cannot answer this question, they do jointly illuminate the central categories of modernity, religion, and secularity from which an answer might come. In the meantime, we are confident that *A Secular Age* has been remarkably, even uniquely, fruitful as a tool for interdisciplinary dialogue, and we would be pleased if readers from various disciplines would share in this estimation.

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